

# Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV)

## About

Respiratory syncytial (sin-SISH-uhl) virus, or RSV, is a **common respiratory virus that usually causes mild, cold-like symptoms**. RSV season occurs each year in most regions of the U.S. during fall, winter, and spring. Most people recover in a week or two, but RSV can be serious, especially for infants and older adults. RSV is the most common cause of bronchiolitis (inflammation of the small airways in the lung) and pneumonia (infection of the lungs) in children younger than 1 year of age in the United States.

## What You Need to Know

- **Most children contract RSV by the time they are 2 years old.** For most babies and young children, an RSV infection causes nothing more than a cold. But for premature babies, infants under 6 months and children less than 5 years old with chronic diseases and/or weakened immune systems, infection with RSV can lead to serious problems.
- **RSV is less contagious than COVID-19 and more contagious than the flu.** RSV can be spread through droplets containing the virus when someone coughs or sneezes. It also can live for many hours on surfaces (such as countertops, doorknobs or toys) and on hands, so it can be easily spread when a person touches something contaminated.
- **RSV can cause illness in anyone.** People usually catch RSV over and over during their lifetime. Because RSV symptoms resemble those of the common cold (runny nose, sore throat, mild headache, cough, and sometimes a fever), parents, young children, and others may not realize they are infected with the virus but can still be contagious. They can therefore easily pass on the infection to high-risk groups through close contact.



### RSV symptoms

People infected with RSV usually show symptoms within 4 to 6 days after getting infected. Symptoms of RSV infection usually include:

- Runny nose
- Decrease in appetite
- Coughing
- Sneezing
- Fever
- Wheezing



### Infants

RSV may not be severe when it first starts. However, it can become more severe a few days into the illness. Early symptoms of RSV may include:

- Runny nose
- Decrease in appetite
- Cough, which may progress to wheezing
- In very young infants with RSV, the only symptoms may be irritability, decreased activity, and breathing difficulties
- Fever may not always occur with RSV infections

## Older Children and Adults

When older children and adults get an RSV infection, they typically have mild cold-like symptoms including runny nose, sore throat, cough, and headache.

## Can RSV be treated?

Fortunately, most cases of RSV are mild and require no specific treatment from doctors. Antibiotics aren't used because RSV is a virus and antibiotics are only effective against bacteria. Medication may sometimes be given to help open airways and to improve breathing.

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## Can RSV be treated? (cont'd)

Older adults who get very sick from RSV may need to be hospitalized. Some may even die. Older adults are at greater risk than young adults for serious complications from RSV because our immune systems weaken when we are older.

## In healthy kids it's not necessary to distinguish RSV from a common cold.

Most healthy children will be able to fight RSV infection. But if a child has other health conditions, a doctor might want to make a specific diagnosis; in that case, RSV is identified in nasal secretions collected either with a cotton swab or by suction through a bulb syringe.

## For most babies and young children, at-home care for RSV is enough.

In an infant, however, an RSV infection that does not go away can become more serious and may require hospitalization so that the baby can be watched closely. They may require more fluids and possibly treatment for breathing problems.

Currently there is no vaccine to prevent RSV infection, but there are multiple vaccines in development. For children at the highest risk of contracting RSV (e.g. premature babies, severely immunocompromised) there is a preventive antibody treatment SYNAGIS (palivizumab) a prescription medication that is used to help prevent a serious lung disease caused by respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) in children. If you are concerned about your risk for RSV, talk to your doctor.

## Lower the chances of catching RSV by practicing good health habits

### How to protect yourself and loved ones

- Wash your hands often. Wash your hands often with soap and water for 20 seconds. If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer. Washing your hands will help protect you from germs.
- Keep your hands off your face. Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands. Germs spread this way.
- Avoid close contact with someone who may have RSV. Avoid close contact, such as kissing, and sharing cups or eating utensils with people who have cold-like symptoms.
- Cover your coughs and sneezes. Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing. Throw the tissue in the trash afterward.
- Clean and disinfect surfaces. Clean and disinfect surfaces that people frequently touch, such as doorknobs. When people infected with RSV touch surfaces and objects, they can leave behind germs. Also, when they cough or sneeze, droplets containing germs can land on surfaces and objects.
- Stay home when you are sick. This will help protect others from catching your illness.

### For more information visit:

- [cdc.gov/rsv](https://cdc.gov/rsv)
- [childrensnational.org/visit/conditions-and-treatments/airway-lungs/respiratory-syncytial-virus-rsv](https://childrensnational.org/visit/conditions-and-treatments/airway-lungs/respiratory-syncytial-virus-rsv)